Fifth Sunday of Lent Year C

The gospel character I want to draw your attention to today is not the distressed and frightened woman hauled in front of a baying crowd; it’s none of her accusers who take advantage of her a second time to set up a dilemma for Jesus. And it isn’t even Jesus himself.

No, the character that most intrigues me is the one who upon hearing Jesus’s challenge for the first stone to be cast by someone blameless of sin, leads by example and drifts away from the mob.

We are not given a name but we are told that this was the eldest person.

The incident occurs in the Temple and the crowd stirred into frenzy by the scribes and Pharisees started out as a mixture of disciples and others drawn to hear his teaching. Some perhaps seeing and hearing Jesus for the first time. Some, regular visitors to the Temple and others occasional sightseers.

My guess, and it is only a guess, is that the eldest person was someone not unlike the two elderly characters who some thirty or so years earlier had welcomed Mary and Joseph to the Temple when they came to present Jesus as an infant.

Simeon and Anna were deeply spiritual characters so completely open to the prompting of God that they recognised the significance of a tiny baby. They understood too that his life would be marked with the kind of suffering through which God could work miracles.

So I’m suggesting that the eldest person of today’s gospel may have been the kind of character who had reached a richly integrated level of faith. The kind that described by the American theologian James Fowler as universalising: According to Fowler this is a somewhat rare achievement attained by those who have passed through many other stages of faith including Intuitive, Literal, Synthetic (pulling together) peer group identity, Individualist, Dialogue and Openness.

He writes:

“Some few persons we find move into… universalizing faith. In a sense I think we can describe this stage as one in which persons begin radically to live as though what Christians and Jews call the "kingdom of God" were already a fact. I don't want to confine it to Christian and Jewish images of the kingdom. It's more than that. I'm saying these people experience a shift from the self as the centre of experience.

They're at home with what I call a commonwealth of being. We experience these people on the one hand as being more lucid and simple than we are; and on the other hand as intensely liberated and liberating people, sometimes even subversive in their liberating qualities”.

There is a wisdom that comes from keeping faith with God through thick and thin. In our age this has become somewhat unfashionable. We look for easy answers, quick fixes and it is not really comfortable to stand out from the crowd in a society that views such faith with scorn.

Yet, it is encouraging and inspiring to witness the serenity with which some among us navigate their way through life with all its pains, challenges and quandaries; with their faith intact.

And hopefully, we will follow in their footsteps.

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